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ABSTRACT

Noting that one of the most challenging tasks educators face in improving parent involvement, particularly among parents of English as a Second Language (ESL) students, this paper describes categories of parent involvement, examines several barriers to parent involvement, and offers suggestions for improving parent involvement. Suggestions for improving involvement of ESL parents include offering ESL, bilingual, or family literacy programs to the families; using bilingual staff; translating all school communications with families; and integrating bilingual and multicultural materials in school displays. Appended is a copy of a survey for parents (in English and Spanish versions) regarding preferences for parent involvement in their child's education. (Contains 10 references.) (KB)

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Reasons For and Solutions To Lack of Parent Involvement of Parents of Second Language Learners

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Reasons For and Solutions To Lack of Parent Involvement of Parents of Second Language Learners

One of the most challenging tasks as an educator is improving parent involvement in the lives of our students. What is parent involvement? The answer to this question differs according to whom you ask. According to a study of what teachers believe parent involvement is, a typical comment made by teachers is "We offer wonderful events, but families don't come." (Vandegrift and Greene, 1992). However, this same study found that a fundamental problem is that schools don't always know what parent involvement really means. Research indicates that parent involvement is often defined as diverse activities occurring either at home or at school to allow parents to share in their child's education (Wright, 2001). This research makes the point that not all parent involvement has to happen directly at the school.

Other research states that parent involvement at school does not affect a child's academic achievement. Yet, this is where most schools focus their energies in trying to promote parent involvement (University of Oklahoma, 2001). We often, as educators, judge our parents by their involvement in after school activities, which all require high levels of commitment and participation.

According to Vandegrift and Greene, there are two key elements to parent involvement. The first is support, which is defined as encouraging their children and being sympathetic, reassuring and understanding. Support also involves a high level of commitment to their children and their education. The second element of parent involvement is active involvement. Active involvement is doing something that is observable (Vandegrift and Greene, 1992).

According to this study, these two elements combine to describe four categories of parent involvement. The first type of parent is the parent who not only participates in school activities

but also supports their child by communicating with the teacher. In addition, this parent may become involved in decision-making activities for the school. However, the research points out that this is not a comfortable role for most parents, thus it should not be the goal of efforts to improve parent involvement.

The second type of parent is not a "joiner". However, they care deeply about their child's education. These parents typically find comfort in the educator coming into their home or sending notes or newsletters with ideas or activities they can do at home to support their child's education.

The third type of parent is rare. This may be the abusive parent. This parent seems to be "involved" in that they attend parent-teacher conferences, school activities, etc., but this is only on the surface. In reality, they are not supportive of their child's education. In fact, they may mistreat their child or neglect their basic physical and emotional needs (Vandegrift and Greene, 1992).

Finally, the fourth type of parent is the parent towards which most efforts to improve parental involvement should be directed. These are the parents that are neither supportive nor actively involved in their child's education. The reasons for this relate to the fact that the parents' own problems are the priority at hand.

Unfortunately, parents who are perceived as unsupportive could be at risk themselves. They may be dealing with problems such as poverty, drug addiction, alcoholism, child abuse, or bad memories from their own school years (Strong Families, Strong Schools, 2001; Vandegrift and Greene, 1992; University of Oklahoma, 2001). As educators, we need to keep this in mind and take it into consideration when making efforts to improve parent involvement.

Research shows and we, as educators, know that "active involvement of parents in children's schooling has a positive impact on their school adjustment and performance" (Peregoy and Boyle, 2001). If we know this, then why aren't educators' efforts to improve parent involvement working? There are many aspects to consider in answering this question.

One of the major factors preventing parent involvement with their children's school is lack of time or work obligations. This fact is proven both by research and by an informal survey done with some of our local students and parents. In the student survey (Perry, Prentiss and Kauffman, 2001), 83% of the students cited work obligations as the reason why their parents are often unable to attend school functions. In the parent survey (Perry, Prentiss and Kauffman, 2001), 38% of the parents cited work or insufficient time as reasons why they have difficulty being more involved in their students' education.

The lack of time or conflict with work obligations was also a reason supported by research. With the rise of two breadwinner families, one parent-families and the need for family members to hold more than one job, families may have demands on their time that prevent them from being as involved as they might like to be. "Sixty-six percent of employed parents with children under 18 said they do not have enough time for their children" (Strong Families, Strong Schools, 2001). Along with these facts, many second language learners are unaccompanied minors and/or heads of households and do not have the luxury of parental involvement (Simich-Dudgeon, 1986).

Cultural barriers also play a major part in preventing parents of these second language learners from becoming involved in their children's education. Many of these parents do not speak or understand English. They view school as an incomprehensible system. The language barrier causes a special problem for low-economic families who have little or no education

themselves. "Families also have different views on school's teaching and their own role in their children's education" (Strong Families, Strong Schools, 2001). Some families come from cultures where the school and teachers are viewed as having higher status than they do. A "teachers can do no wrong" attitude creates an unnecessary gulf between homes and schools (Bermudez and Marquez, 1996).

Lack of self-confidence and unfavorable past experiences also affect the level of parent involvement of these students' parents. Research indicates that some parents believe that the language barrier leaves them powerless to be involved in their children's education (Hyslop, 1999). Many of these parents have had bad experiences in school themselves, and thus, are reluctant to be involved with the school, even as a parent. They may feel intimidated by the schools and unsure of their contribution. In addition, it is likely that "these parents have fallen victim to racial and linguistic discrimination by the schools which has made them become disenchanted with the system" (Bermudez and Marquez, 1996).

Reasons for lack of parent involvement for second language learners are not all related to the parent perspective. Schools have not always targeted their efforts to meet the real needs of these parents (Vandegrift and Greene, 1992). We conclude that this is partly due to the fact that schools do not have the manpower to do some of the things that would be effective in reaching these parents.

An example of one effort that would work is bridging the language barrier by translating school communications into all the different languages that may be represented in a school. However, in our experience as educators, we have concluded that translators are not always available for these many different languages.

Another barrier perhaps directly or indirectly caused by the schools has to do with prejudicial or judgmental attitudes toward these families. "Many educators perceive low-income parents as unable to participate in schools due to the immensity of their life problems. Consequently, educators are reluctant to initiate and maintain meaningful contact" (Bermudez and Marquez, 1996). In addition, when the educators do communicate with these parents, they too often use educational jargon.

As stated earlier, another factor that makes schools' efforts to involve the parents of second language learners ineffective is the fact that they too often direct their efforts in the wrong direction. Schools are often most concerned with involving parents in after school activities. However, this is not the type of support that is really effective in improving the students' performance at school. In addition, most parent involvement efforts should be directed towards the parents who are not supportive, or actively involved. Perhaps educators spend too much time trying to reach all the parents of second language learners and, instead, should be concentrating on this group where the needs are greatest.

Research gives a wealth of ideas for improving parental involvement of these students' parents. However, there are common strategies throughout the research we studied. Some of these strategies are as follows.

The most common suggestion in this research deals with offering ESL, bilingual, or family literacy programs to these families. "When parents learn English, they set a good example for their children, increase their own confidence and abilities, and better understand their children's school experiences" (Careaga, 1988). However, the research repeatedly makes the point that for these programs to be successful, they must be scheduled according to the families' schedules, child care must be provided, the classes must be held on a regular basis, and

the program facilitators must understand that they are making a long-term commitment to these families. Furthermore, in order to make these programs work, schools should survey the parents at enrollment time to determine their needs, schedules, and desires to be involved in their children's education. A sample of such a survey is attached to this research paper.

The next most common suggestion from the research involved the use of bilingual staff and translation of all school communications including phone messages. Suggestions were made to have bilingual teaching staff, bilingual aides and paraprofessionals, as well as bilingual parent advocates, coordinators, and home visit personnel. Basically, the language barrier should never be an obstacle to these parents being involved with the schools.

There were many other suggestions in the research for improving these parents' involvement in the schools. Some examples are integrating bilingual and multicultural materials in school displays and providing regularly scheduled informational meetings specifically for these parents. The information given in these meetings would concern informing parents about activities at school, familiarizing them with the similarities and differences between their native schools and U.S. schools, and orienting them to the idea of being involved with the school and staff.

In summary, as educators we are faced with many challenges. One of the challenges is parent involvement. What is parent involvement? Research indicates that it includes both support and active participation. These two characteristics combine to define four different degrees of parent involvement. However, the parent who is neither supportive nor actively involved is the one we, as educators, need to direct our efforts toward. Factors preventing parent involvement include time, work obligations, cultural and language barriers, and lack of self-confidence. In addition to these, schools also may have prejudicial or judgmental attitudes

toward these families and may use educational jargon. Many suggestions for improving parental involvement are found in research. Among these are offering ESL, bilingual or family literacy programs, translating all school communications into native languages, providing bilingual staff in all facets of the educational setting, integrating bilingual or multicultural materials in school displays, and providing regularly scheduled informational meetings for parents of ESL students.

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Appendix 1:

Dear Parent,

As a part of a college class project, myself and two other teachers are developing a survey for the parents of English as a Second Language (ESL) student. The idea behind the survey is to find ways that we can encourage parent participation for the ESL students. Parent participation from ESL students tends to be lower than that of some of the other students. We would like to know why, and what we can do to increase parent involvement. Students whose parents are involved in school programs perform better in school, and are more likely to complete their education. The questions we are asking are not designed to embarrass you, and your answers will be kept private. We may call you if we need more information, or need an answer explained. Remember, our goal is the same as yours—to give your child the best education we can!

Sincerely,

Dear Parent,

It is our goal to provide the best school program possible for your child. To do this we need you to play an active role in your child's education. We would like to know more about your family, how you feel about the program, and the kind of information you would like for us to provide about the school. With this information, we can improve the way we work with you. You can help us develop the program by answering the following questions. The answers you give to the questions will only be used to help develop the school program and will be kept private. Thank you for your help.

Parent name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Child's name: _____ Grade: _____

Child's name: _____ Grade: _____

Child's name: _____ Grade: _____

Survey Questions:

1. How long have you lived in the United States?

2. What language do you generally speak at home with your children?

3. Do you speak the same language with your spouse?

4. Do you have a job outside the home? If so, please state where.

5. What level of education have you completed?

6. __Elementary school __High school __College/University

7. Would you be interested in helping with school activities?

8. __Yes __No if no, please state reasons.

9. If you would like to participate in school activities, what times do you prefer?

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Morning					
Afternoon					
Evening					

10. To participate in parent activities, which of the following would you prefer? (Check all that apply.)
    ____On-site babysitting
    ____Transportation
    ____A neighbor or friend to accompany you
    ____Interpreter

11. What types of activities would you be interested in? (Check all that apply.)
    ____Room parent
    ____Volunteer in classroom
    ____Parent advisory committee
    ____Learn how to help your child with school work
    ____Visit your child's class

Appendix 2:

Estimados padres,

Como parte de un proyecto de la clase de la universidad, yo misma y otros profesores están desarrollando una encuesta para los padres del inglés como estudiantes de un Segundo lenguaje (ESL). La idea detrás de la encuesta es encontrar maneras que podemos animar la participación del los padres para los estudiantes de ESL. La participación del los padres de estudiantes de ESL tiende es más baja que algunos de los otros estudiantes. Quisiéramos saber porqué, y lo que podemos hacer para aumentar la implicación del padre. Los estudiantes que tienen padres que están implicados en programas de la escuela se realizan mejor en escuela, y son más probables terminar su educación. Las preguntas que estamos haciendo no se diseñan para desconcertarle, y sus respuestas serán mantenidas privadas. Podemos llamarle si necesitamos más información, o necesitamos una respuesta explicada. Recuerde, nuestra meta es igual que los suyos -- darle a su niño la mejor educación que podemos!

Estimados Padres,

Es nuestra meta papra proporcionar al major programa de la escuela possible para su nino. Para hacer esto necesitamos desempenar un papel activo en la educacion de su nino. Quisierramos saber mas sobre su familia, como usted se siente sobre la escuela de este informacion, nosotros podemos mejorar la manera trabajando con usted. Usted puede ayudarnos a desarrollar el programa contestando las preguntas siguientes. Las repuestas que usted da a las preguntaas solamente seran utilizadas para ayudar a desarrollar el programa de la ecuela y mantenidas privadas. Gracias por su ayuda.

Nombre del Padre:_____

Domisilo:_____

telefono:_____

Nombre del nino:_____ Grado:_____

Nombre del nino:_____ Grado:_____

Nombre del nino:_____ Grado:_____

Preguntas:

1. Cuanto tiempo usted ha vivido en los Estados Unidos?

2. Qué lenguaje usted habla generalmente en casa con sus niños?

3. ? Usted habla el mismo lenguaje con su esposo?

4. Tiene un trabajo fuera de casa? Si conteste donde..

5. Qué nivel de la educación usted ha terminado?

6. __primaria __secundaria __Colegio

7. Usted estaría interesado en ayudar con actividades de la escuela?

8. __Si __No Si no, indica por favor razones.

9. Si usted quere participar en las actividades del escula, que tiempo es mejor?

	Lunes	martes	miercoles	jueves	viernes
manana					
Medio dia					
tarde					

10. Para participar en las actividades del padre, que del siguiente usted prefirieron ? (indice todas que aplique.)
    ____un sitio cuidando ninos
    ____transporte
    ____un vecino o amigo para acompanarle
    ____interprete

11. Que tipos de actividades Usted estara interesado? (indice todas que aplique.)
    ____ayudate de la clase
    ____voluntario en la sala de clase
    ____padre consultivo
    ____aprende como ayudar a su nino con la tarea
    ____visitan la clase de su nino